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RULE BY  
FEAR





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### *Rule By Fear*

In theory, the military is led by men and women of courage — individuals willing to make hard calls, take responsibility, and speak truth to power. In practice, however, too many are guided not by leadership principles or moral conviction, but by fear: fear of being the next name in an Inspector General (IG) complaint, fear of an Equal Opportunity (EO) investigation, fear of doing anything that might draw unwanted attention from above.

Leadership by fear has replaced leadership by example. It has become safer to conform than to command.

As we wrote in [A Tale of Two Courages](#), published in *The DoD Times Redacted* (June 2025), the military rewards courage on the battlefield but punishes it off the field. “Courage is a currency,” we observed — “minted in the crucible of combat, valorized in ceremonies, and rewarded with medals and promotions.” But moral courage — the willingness to challenge unethical orders, expose wrongdoing, or protect subordinates from a broken system — “often leaves its practitioner discarded, demoted, or disgraced.”

The institution celebrates your courage when you fight the enemy, but it censures your courage when you question the system that commands you. And yet, that moral courage — not tactical bravery — is what sustains the integrity of the force in peacetime.



## The Hegseth Paradox

On 30 September 2025, Secretary of War Pete Hegseth announced his “*No More Walking on Eggshells*” policy, declaring that the IG and EO systems had become “weaponized,” allowing frivolous complaints to “derail” good people’s careers. It was presented as a common-sense correction to a culture of hypersensitivity — a promise to restore commanders’ freedom of action.

But the logic collapses on inspection. The IG and EO systems don’t execute personnel actions — commanders do. It is commanders who place holds on promotions, school attendance, or permanent changes of station. The problem isn’t that oversight mechanisms have become too powerful; it’s that commanders have become too afraid to command.

In our exchanges with supporters of Hegseth’s policy, we often pull the thread until we reach an uncomfortable truth: **the IG and EO systems only have power when commanders are paralyzed into inaction.** The same is true of the Judge Advocate system. These institutions don’t “derail” careers — timid leadership does. When leaders treat every potential complaint as a career-ending event, they surrender initiative and authority to bureaucracy.

## The Culture of Careerism

This fear-based paralysis has metastasized across the ranks. Commanders and senior enlisted leaders increasingly see their job not as leading, but as managing risk — not operational risk, but *personal* risk. Every decision becomes a calculation of what will least offend the system. The result is a force where moral courage has been replaced by moral caution.

Our DoDT(R) piece captured this corrosion: “When moral courage is punished, it atrophies. Good officers learn to stay silent. Junior troops absorb the lesson: integrity is conditional.” The message is clear: it’s safer to go along to get along than to take a principled stand.



The military of today appears to be breeding compliance, not character. Bureaucratic survival has become the highest form of professionalism. Those who color inside the lines are promoted; those who challenge broken systems are quietly pushed out. The institution rewards those who never make waves — even as it slowly drowns in stagnation.

## Reclaiming Courage

It is time to reconcile the military's two courages — battlefield and moral. We cannot continue to valorize the warrior who fires a missile while vilifying the officer who tells an inconvenient truth. Both forms of courage protect the nation: one from foreign enemies, the other from internal decay.

If we continue to reward those who merely avoid being punished, we will end up with leaders who stand for nothing — and when leaders stand for nothing, the institution they serve will inevitably follow.

Leadership is not about walking on eggshells or waiting for the all-clear from legal. It is about acting with integrity, even when it's uncomfortable, even when it's risky. The military's next great reform will not come from a new policy, program, or technology. It will come from leaders willing to reject rule by fear — and to lead once again by principle.

Then, and only then, will our Department of War attain true “warrior ethos.”



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